

7

Western Michigan University responded to the unique and growing needs of military and veteran students by creating an office that spearheaded a move to engage the entire academic community.

A Proactive Approach to Serving Military and Veteran Students

Tracey L. Moon, Geraldine A. Schma

With the introduction of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in August 2009, Veterans Affairs anticipated a 25-percent increase in the number of service members who would enroll in higher education (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009). Between fall 2005 and spring 2010 semesters, Western Michigan University (WMU; Kalamazoo, MI) experienced a 43-percent boom, from just over 300 to just fewer than 500 students representing this population (Western Michigan University, 2010). In anticipation of and response to the unique needs of this special group of adult learners, Western Michigan University created an office to offer resources and support to military and veteran students by coordinating student services providers from across campus and the local community. The philosophies and practices of the WMU administration, faculty, and staff have resulted in 2009 WMU earning recognition as a "Military Friendly Institution" by two different national publications (KMI Media Group, 2009; Victory Media, Inc., 2010). In this chapter, the authors present an overview of the history of the office and the development of the System of Care, the status of the office and programs, and goals for future development and services to meet the ongoing needs of military and veteran students on college campuses.

Identifying the Need

Western Michigan University prides itself on a student body diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity. Because 28 percent of adult learners comprise the student population, an institutional mentality exists that recognizes and supports the multiple priorities and challenges that face these individuals. One component within this group is current and former service members (Western

Michigan University, 2009). Therefore, in 2007, when the first wave of Iraq veterans returned to civilian life and sought college admission or readmission, staff and select faculty recognized the effects of those students' distinct behavior by reviewing transcripts and observing classroom behavior.

Students seeking readmission after midsemester deployments who failed to notify the university had a semester's worth of X's—X being the grade given to students who stop showing up to class early in a semester but never officially drop the course with the registrar's office—and those who did notify were out of sequence in their major. First-time students who submitted military transcripts for evaluation were granted few if any credits, and, in most cases, financial benefits lagged behind institutional due dates. Worse yet, reintegration for combat veterans proved extremely challenging. Not only did military experiences distance them from their much younger classmates, the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression impacted concentration and memory skills in ways that even the student couldn't understand (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

Soon, staff who worked with nontraditional students became concerned with the complexity and seriousness of issues faced by service members and alerted the administration who requested an analysis and recommendations for a solution and a commitment to be more "military friendly." *Military friendly* refers to the intentional efforts made by campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans and create a smooth transition from military to college life (Strickley, 2009). The outcome of research and individual interviews was the creation in April 2007 of the Advocacy Office for Transfer Students and Military Affairs (recently renamed The Office of Veteran and Military Affairs) devoted to supporting the needs of current service members and veterans (Baron, 2007).

System of Care

The success of the office rests on two guiding principles: listen to the soldiers and "everybody plays." A review of academic records identified that problems existed, but listening to the soldiers' stories and expressed frustrations identified specific problems and their origins. It immediately became evident that advocacy staff needed to support the many soldiers, but also to educate and engage the academic community. In such instances, usually the brightest and most committed volunteer, and fortunately this was no exception. Faculty and administrators in student affairs, health and human services, the unified clinics, and academic support units came together to form a military oversight committee to collaborate with the advocacy office to create a program known as the "System of Care." This concept allows a forum in which students and university staff could access resources to address most any personal or health issue a military student may face.

Thus, the principle of "everybody plays" was embraced. "Everybody plays" refers to the buy-in from faculty and staff to embrace and actively participate in the military-friendly paradigm. Educational seminars given by Veterans Administration counselors, as well as presentations by the military advocate and student veterans themselves, provided insight into this unique population. They also had the desirable effect of creating opportunities for faculty, staff, and community members to step forward to express interest and offer their particular expertise.

Meanwhile, the "everybody plays" concept was expanded to the notion of a caring community that not only includes the System of Care, but also involves other areas that could address academic, social, or individual needs. A very critical component was the Military and Veterans Student Association (MVSA), which was one of the first student organizations to affiliate with the national Student Veterans of America (SVA). This organization is the official voice of student veterans and works closely with the military affairs office to address current and critical issues (SVA, 2010). Members also interface with local veterans groups, such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and student groups from local and statewide veteran student organizations. Other caring community venues include community networks such as food banks, housing services, and family service agencies. Academic support services include academic departments, admissions, the registrar's office, and student services. Military support services originally included the VA hospital, the VA Administration, and state VA support groups and services, but has also grown to include installations from all branches of the military.

Responding to the Need

Once the advocacy office was in place, listening and responding to the needs of the service members was top priority. One critical issue expressed by this population and verified by Strickley (2009) was the need for accurate and timely receipt of GI Bill benefits. WMU was already at the forefront of addressing this issue, as one full-time staff person in the registrar's office was designated as the certifying official for the university. This staff member's sole responsibility is to submit and monitor all GI Bill benefits with the Veterans Administration. Although that may not seem that impressive, at other institutions, the certifying official usually has other responsibilities within the department, therefore taking away from the focus on veterans.

Military and Veteran Student Association. According to the Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009), providing ways for veterans to connect with each other inside and outside the classroom is important and the Military and Veteran Student Association (MVSA) attempts to do just that.

This registered student organization allows for camaraderie for military and veteran students, including Reserve Officer Training Corps students and family members on WMU's campus. The MVSA office is accessible and

welcoming, and it offers a voice to this population. In addition to providing support for students, its members strive to connect to the university community, as well as the local community. The MVSA sponsors a Veteran's Day Run from the campus to Ft. Custer National Cemetery. This event not only involves current students running, but also alumni, community members, and members of the Veterans Administration. The MVSA also supports the Marine Corps League's Toys for Tots and solicits donations for care packages to be sent to WMU students who are deployed. In addition, the MVSA partners with WMU Athletics for annual Veterans Appreciation football and hockey games to promote awareness. The MVSA also partners with Kalamazoo Valley Community College's student association and has created ties to veteran students wanting to eventually transfer to WMU.

Veterans Administration. Although all military branches offer GI Bill benefit information during after-deployment briefings, many soldiers are focused on getting home and back to their families and end up very confused about their benefits (Cook and Kim, 2009). To address this lack of understanding, WMU has asked the local Veterans Administration (VA) hospital to send the VA Transition Advocate to campus once a month to meet with students about any VA-related issue, but in particular, benefits. Despite the VA already being stressed, the VA director recognized the need and positive partnership and gave approval on a trial basis, allowing students to conveniently meet with someone in person on campus and have their questions answered (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

Another way the local VA collaborates with the university is via a PTSD Clinical Psychologist, a WMU alumni, who serves on the military oversight committee and has facilitated educational workshops on campus. Students have voiced an appreciation for having a VA presence on campus and veteran's publications indicate these types of partnerships are purposeful and beneficial for all involved (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

On a national level, WMU administration has given approval to participate in the VA Yellow Ribbon program since the program's inception in 2009 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). This is a voluntary financial commitment by the higher education institution to offer funding to veterans whose benefits do not completely cover their tuition and fees: the VA then matches these funds. To date, six WMU students have benefitted from this program (WMU, 2009).

Additional Military Friendly Policies and Practices. Participation in proactive support included the highest level of campus leadership members and administration and a variety of campus department members.

Financial. The Board of Trustees directed that some form of transitional support be provided to current and future deployed students. With the input of the financial aid office, the Returning Veterans Tuition Assistance program was developed. The RVTA program (Roland, 2007) awarded full tuition for the first semester. This not only relieved the stress

caused by delayed payment but when monies were finally received, the veteran could apply them to the next semester, thus providing a continual safety net.

In addition, all students received in-state status for subsequent semesters. The Board of Trustees later extended in-state status to spouses and dependent family members (Davis, 2008). This practice was later adopted by all Michigan higher education institutions. The tuition assistance program was enthusiastically received by student veterans and is credited with spearheading WMU's recognition as a military friendly school and other supportive efforts on campus.

Formal procedures were established by the registrar that expedited the deployment process. When active-duty students are deployed, all they have to do to receive funds for fees, books, and tuition they have already paid is to provide the university with a copy of their orders. Students are allowed to withdraw or be granted incompletes, and user-friendly checklists identifying withdrawal and reentry processes were provided to the student.

Lastly, due to delayed benefit payment by the VA, students have the option to access an emergency loan through WMU to pay for expenses, such as books or housing. The registrar and accounts receivable office also started to identify military students who were waiting on the VA to pay tuition bills to make sure no holds were put on the students' accounts so that they were allowed to register for next semester classes without delay.

Classes, communication, and graduation. To keep deployed students connected to the campus and on the path to graduation, practices regarding registration, methods of communication, and graduation recognition were put in place to support them.

Many faculty responded positively to encouragement to work with deployed students to finish coursework expeditiously while in the field or immediately upon their return. Many creative responses by faculty have been and continue to be offered to provide continuity during deployments. A policy was implemented granting all deployed students priority registration prior to and for one year immediately following deployment, which helped students maintain programmatic sequence. As in the registrar's office, the admissions office designated one credit evaluator whose sole responsibility is to assess military transcripts by using clear documented criteria to award credit.

While in the field, military students are allowed to maintain student email accounts for up to one year to remain connected to the university. In response to the difficulty in determining the number of enrolled military students, the graduate, undergraduate, and readmission applications now contain a question requesting students to self-identify. This military status also allows military and veteran students to be identified and recognized during graduation ceremonies by being offered red, white, and blue honor cords to wear at commencement and being asked to stand by the president during the convocation (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

Continue to Listen, Then Meet and Exceed Expectations

Although WMU has been on the forefront of being military friendly, a need for continuous improvement always exists. To do that, key staff members have attended conferences across the nation to network, learn from, and share successes with other institutions.

Program Implementation. At the Department of Defense Education Symposium in 2009, many excellent presenters shared information and ideas for effectively serving this population. For example, attendees learned about and subsequently applied for grants to increase the level of service to veterans on campus and to be educated about the effectiveness of first-year courses to address the transition from soldier to student (Anthony, 2009; Schupp, 2009). In response, a two-credit, transition course was approved by WMU academic administration and was offered for the first time during the fall 2010 semester. In addition, for the first time, a one-credit meditation course for veterans is being offered by a counseling faculty member who is also a veteran, to help meet the requests of students to learn how to better cope with the stress of going to school. The Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009) highly recommends offering an orientation program specifically for veterans where pertinent information is presented by key university contacts. When this concept was proposed to current military students, the reaction was positive; therefore, one has been offered at WMU at the beginning of the 2010–2011 school year.

Military Students' Suggestions. According to several publications and conversations with WMU military students, two main observations surfaced: (1) faculty and staff need additional training to be more sensitive to veterans on campus, and (2) military and veteran students need mentoring (Frantz and Asher, 2009, p. 48).

University-wide training. Despite offering webinars and speakers on campus to educate the campus community about military students on campus, students still voiced encountering some misperceptions about them (Frantz and Asher, 2009). The administration distributed a flier to all faculty, staff, and administrators across campus directing them to provide tools and resources when interacting with military students to best meet their needs. Informative presentations, offered in collaboration with the Office of Faculty Development and other administrative bodies on campus and delivered in steps, are planned, beginning with faculty and continuing through summer semesters and into the upcoming 2011–2012 academic year.

Mentoring. As a diverse and typically underserved population on college campuses, making connections to other military students is crucial (Strickley, 2009). WMU students have echoed that view and to meet the need, WMU is exploring two programs to implement. First, a faculty and staff mentoring program was developed that recommended that faculty and staff with any military background volunteer to mentor incoming, first-year military students.

This will allow for additional exposure and connection to the military affairs office by employees and will connect new students with people who are familiar with both the campus and the military perspective. Second, WMU is going to be participating with the Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit organization with a mission to honor and empower severely injured service members, which will also provide veteran education transition assistance through veteran students mentoring other veteran students (Wounded Warrior, 2010).

Summary

As universities continue to experience an influx of military and veteran students utilizing their GI Bill benefits, faculty and staff will be asked to accommodate this traditionally underserved population. Western Michigan University has not only attempted to accommodate, but also to embrace service members who want to pursue higher education. Although implementing programs and policies may seem challenging in the beginning, the payoff in welcoming and providing services to ensure the success of this most deserving group will come not only in dollars, but also in the satisfaction and pride in knowing the university's employees did the right thing.

References

- Anthony, L. K. "Institutional Grants to Support Projects for Veterans for Veterans-Related Research." Presentation at Department of Defense Education Symposium, Atlanta, July 29, 2009.
- Baron, J. 2007. "Advocacy Office Fills Important Need." *WMU News Archive*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, September 14. <http://www.wmich.edu/wmu/news/2007/09/033.html>.
- Cook, B. J., and Kim, Y. 2009. *From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus*. Washington DC: American Council on Education.
- Davis, P. M. "Western Michigan University to Offer In-State Tuition to All Active Military Members." Kalamazoo, March 18, 2008. News Archive (blog). http://blog.wmich.edu/wmich/2008/03/western_michigan_university_wi.html.
- Frantz, S., and Asher, G. 2009. *Supporting Veterans in the Classroom*. Minnesota State College and Universities, Little Falls, MN: PaperClip Communications.
- KMI Media Group. 2009. 3rd Annual Guide to Military-Friendly Colleges & Universities. *Military Advanced Education* 4(6), 65.
- Roland, C. 2007. WMU News Archives. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, May 2. Retrieved July 16, 2010, from <http://www.wmich.edu/wmu/news/2007/09/033.html>.
- Schupp, J. 2009. *Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran-SERV* (pp. 1–33). Atlanta: Cleveland State University.
- Strickley, V. L. 2009. *Veterans on Campus*. Little Falls, MN: PaperClip Communications.
- Student Affairs Leadership Council, eds. 2009. *From Military Service to Student Life: Strategies for Supporting Student Veterans on Campus*. Washington, DC: The Advisory Board Company.
- Student Veterans of America (SVA). 2010. "Michigan SVA Chapters." Washington, DC: Student Veterans of America. Accessed July 15, 2010, <http://www.studentveterans.org/chapters/search.php>.

- US Department of Veterans Affairs. "MI State Yellow Ribbon Program Information 2010–2011." Washington, DC: US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010. Accessed July 15, 2010, http://www.gibill.va.gov/gi_bill_info/ch33/YRP/2010/states/mi.htm.
- Victory Media Inc. 2010. "Military Friendly Schools." Pittsburgh: Victory Media Inc. Accessed August 18, 2010, <http://www.militaryfriendlyschools.com/search/profile.aspx?id=200004>.
- Western Michigan University (WMU). 2009. "Registered Student Information by Population." Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.
- Western Michigan University (WMU). 2010. "Registered Student Information by Veteran Type." Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.
- Wounded Warrior Project. 2010. Accessed January 31, 2010, <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>.

TRACEY L. MOON is the director of the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs at Western Michigan University.

GERALDINE A. SCHMA is a retired military advocate from the Advocacy Office for Transfer Students and Military Affairs, and the coordinator of the Veterans Transition Program of the Student Veterans of America.